

FAQ – SAAM, MST AND VA SERVICES

During Sexual Assault Awareness Month (SAAM) every April, VA redoubles its year-round efforts to increase public awareness of military sexual trauma (MST), MST's impact on survivors and VA's free MST-related services and support. To emphasize VA's support and recognition of survivors' strength, resilience and ability to heal, VA's message for SAAM 2023 continues to be "We believe you, **and we believe in you.**"

Find answers to some of the most frequently asked questions below. For more information or to explore VA's services for MST survivors, visit www.MentalHealth.va.gov/MST.

What is SAAM?

Sexual Assault Awareness Month, or SAAM, is observed every April to raise awareness about sexual violence and educate communities about preventing sexual harassment and assault. Its origins are in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and heightened social activism related to the issue of sexual assault in the 1970s helped the observance gain momentum. Originally lasting one week, the observance expanded to a full month in the 1990s. SAAM was officially recognized by the National Sexual Violence Resource Center in 2001.

What is MST?

VA uses the term "military sexual trauma," or MST, to refer to sexual assault or threatening sexual harassment that occurs during military service. Anyone in the military can experience MST, regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities or branch of service. MST can occur at any time or place during military service — while on or off duty and on or off base. The perpetrator or perpetrators may or may not be known to the survivor and may be fellow Service members or civilians.

MST can include:

- Being pressured or coerced into sexual activities, such as with threats of negative treatment for refusing to cooperate or with promises of better treatment in exchange for sex.
- Being physically forced to have sex.
- Being touched in a sexual way that makes you uncomfortable, including during "hazing."
- Being subjected to comments about your body or sexual activities that you found threatening.
- Sexual contact without your consent, such as when you are asleep or intoxicated.
- Receiving unwanted sexual messages or texts.
- Having intimate images or videos taken or shared without your permission.

How does MST affect survivors?

It's important to understand that MST is an experience, not a diagnosis. As with other types of trauma, people can react to MST in many different ways. Although MST can be a life-changing experience, survivors are remarkably resilient. Some recover on their own. For many, however, the experience of MST continues to affect their mental and physical health, work, relationships



or everyday life — sometimes years after the experience. More information on the effects of MST can be found at www.MentalHealth.va.gov/MST.

How many Veterans and former Service members experienced MST?

When asked by their VA health care provider whether they experienced sexual harassment or sexual assault during military service, about 1 in 3 women and 1 in 50 men respond yes. This means that there are significant numbers of both men and women who have experienced MST. In fact, almost one-third of individuals who tell a VA provider they experienced MST are men.

What VA services are available for MST survivors?

Every VA health care facility has an MST Coordinator, a professional who specializes in connecting survivors with the care and services that are right for them. Outpatient MST-related services are available at every VA health care system, and MST-related counseling services are also available at VA's community-based [Vet Centers](#). For individuals who need more intensive treatment and support, VA offers treatment in residential and inpatient settings. Treatment for physical health conditions related to MST is also available. Individuals can ask to meet with a clinician of a particular gender if that would help them feel more comfortable.

Who is eligible for VA's MST-related services?

Eligibility for MST-related care is expansive, and survivors may be eligible for MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA services. VA provides free treatment for any physical or mental health condition related to MST. To [learn more about eligibility for MST-related care](#), call your [local VA facility](#) and ask for the [MST Coordinator](#).

What can I do next?

- Learn about MST and MST-related services at www.MentalHealth.va.gov/MST, and let survivors know, we believe them, and we believe in them.
- If you experienced MST and want to learn more or are ready to seek support:
 - Contact your [local VA facility's MST Coordinator](#) or talk to your VA health care provider. You also may contact a local [Vet Center](#).
 - Download [Beyond MST](#), a free, secure self-help mobile app created specifically to support MST survivors' health and well-being. The app has over 30 specialized tools and other features to help MST survivors cope with challenges, manage symptoms, improve their quality of life and find hope. You do not need to create an account or be in treatment to use the app. Personal information entered in the app is not shared with anyone, including VA. You can get Beyond MST from any app store.

If you are in crisis and need immediate assistance, connect with the 24/7 Veterans Crisis Line by calling 988 and pressing 1, texting to 838255 or chatting online at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat. You will reach one of VA's caring, qualified responders — many of whom are Veterans themselves.

